

# REVIEW OF *MIND FIELDS: ADOLESCENT CONSCIOUSNESS IN A CULTURE OF DISTRACTION*

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Cottle, Thomas J. 2001. *Mind Fields: Adolescent Consciousness in a Culture of Distraction*. New York: Peter Lang.  
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According to Thomas J. Cottle in *Mind Fields: Adolescent Consciousness in a Culture of Distraction*, the work of adolescence is to construct an identity or sense of self—work that hinges on deep reflection. He posits that we live in a culture that takes adolescents away from such deep thought with a constant barrage of artificial values. Adolescents are distracted when they focus on the trivial and superficial, missing what is deeply important. The insistent “noise” of TV, radio, and computer and the dazzle of rock stars and TV personalities draw them away from needed reflection, much like the sirens of Greek mythology hastened the destruction of the ancient sailors with the call of their irresistible songs.

Cottle defines *distract* as “to draw the mind away from something or divert its attention, to cause conflict or confusion, to experience boredom . . . to feel crazed or mad” (p. 21). Adolescents are distracted when they sense the confusion of competing elements in their minds, when they are bored or anxious. Rather than deal with anxiety, boredom, and conflict however, they seek distraction. The author also describes this distraction as a kind of madness, in which an enormous number of stimuli are hitting the consciousness at the same time, an invasion adolescents are unable to process. Everything has the power to influence—and these stimuli are often conflicting. Every medium

competes for the adolescent’s attention: the media, advertising, television, and the Internet.

“Everything must be perceived . . . larger than life, or adolescents pay little heed to it” (p. 35). Cottle’s description reminds me of driving into Hollywood and being inundated with ads for various shows. Bright lights and enormous faces on giant billboards scream for attention! All of us suffer this kind of constant and repeated hammering. We can become so desensitized by this insistent flashing of the outer world, it becomes nearly impossible to think a quiet coherent thought. For an adolescent still seeking a valued self, however, it is distraction overload.

In indicting the media for literally shaping the words the young have adopted to describe and interpret the world, the author says, “They [the media] shape the way adolescents access and feel about themselves just as they shape the nature of an adolescent’s capacity to think critically and his or her sense of morality and responsibility” (p. 19). Cottle describes adolescents as so bombarded with stimuli, they have no time or energy to think deeply about their lives, no concentration to read a book or just sit still. He says adolescents are in a constant rush for more stimuli and to surround themselves with noise and distraction. No sense of focus can develop in this state, and these “adolescents grow increasingly unable to concentrate on a single item, thought, task, or feeling” (p. 29). How can they ignore the multitude of stimuli and concentrate on one idea or goal? Distraction causes the mind to focus on the unauthentic. There is a sense of always running—searching

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for something outside the self to bring satisfaction. But there is no satisfaction, and so they run faster and harder. The “impact of this distraction on the human mind has led an entire nation to the brink of ADD” (p. 33), Cottle comments. There is no place an adolescent can go where his senses are not assaulted. Radio music and advertisements grab our attention even at the dentist’s office, the market, and the mall. The more NOISE, the more normal life seems. Silence has come to be uncomfortable—even terrifying. He poses that the serenity adolescents are looking for “ultimately can be found only in their consciousness, but they must learn to create it . . . and nurture it” (p. 31).

Cottle’s antidote to the adolescent’s pursuit of distraction is self-reflective thought. He quotes John Dewey as saying, “If a man’s actions are not guided by thoughtful conclusions, then they are guided by inconsiderate impulse, unbalanced appetite, caprice or the circumstances of the moment” (p. 125). The evidence of Dewey’s wisdom abounds in the “pattern of the [American] culture,” which uses trips, cruises, or golf tournaments as just another form of distraction. The author’s message is clear: “Self-reflection [is] the antidote to distraction for adolescents as well as adults” (p. 203). Cottle speaks to all of us, presenting life experience as a constant choice between reflec-

tion and self-examination that may bring feelings of joy or despair and “that endless line of distractions filled with glittering sights, tantalizing sounds, and wondrous tastes” (p. 212).

Although Cottle’s work does contain some sparkling gems of truth, you will have to endure much repetition and meandering to find them. He wanders through issues like independence versus intimacy, anorexia, the evils of individuality, competition, beauty contests, and celebrity worship. He extends his subject to “road rage” and the reduction of adolescent language into meaningless phrases such as “It was like, oh, my God,” “You know,” or “I mean” to express intense emotion—examples of screen-speak mentality according to Cottle. If *Mind Fields* could be reduced by cutting the repetition, unnecessary quotes, extended dialogue, and extraneous subjects, it would make a terrific article. As a book, however, it is tedious and disappointing.

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